



Orthodoxy in the Modern World & The Meaning of Anathema by Saint Philaret of New York

Homily by Saint Philaret of New York [1]

Yesterday, during the all-night vigil, brethren, we talked about the difficulties the Orthodox Church faced in ancient times, starting with the era of persecutions and followed by the era of heresies. But that is in the past and far from us now. Let us look around at the conditions in which the Church and true Orthodoxy find themselves today. There were heresies in the past, but what we have now is something entirely different: spiritual counterfeits, spiritual falsehoods, and temptations to replace the true Church and true Orthodoxy with false churches or, at the very least, distorted Orthodoxy.

You are well aware of the widespread infection of so-called ecumenism nowadays, and many are eager to stand on its platform—those with flexible backbones and consciences. This platform seems convenient! They say, "We want to unite everyone together. We acknowledge that each Church, each confession holds a portion of truth, and we want to unite these portions of truth together to create a new true Church." This means, as I mentioned before, that our Russian Orthodox Church [Abroad] must accept that it does not possess the fullness of Christ's truth, only a part of it, while everything else is false and delusion. What would St. Seraphim of Sarov or St. John of Kronstadt say if they were told such a thing?

Our Orthodox Church possesses the truth and firmly stands in it, and it will never deviate from the truth. We, as individuals, are weak, both the clergy and the laity; each of us may stumble and err. However, in the Church, we possess the truth by the great mercy of God, and we will never agree that it is not the complete truth, but only a part of it. From this temptation arises another; fundamental unfaithfulness always leads to practical unfaithfulness. Take the so-called "modernism," which infiltrates everywhere into the life of the Church today. Do we not see how our divine services are distorted and emptied to the point of being unrecognizable? Ancient patristic traditions and our Russian Orthodox traditions are dismissed as outdated and no longer necessary. You remember well the confusion and temptation when those who once split from the

Church Abroad here in America, and whom we hoped would one day return and be reunited, declared their so-called "autocephaly" [2]. Some parishes with their spiritual leaders separated from them, and recently, even one of the archpastors, who now prays and serves here—His Grace Archbishop Ambrosius—departed from their autocephaly. He saw what this red [soviet] autocephaly was turning into and, by joining us, testified that the archpastoral conscience of a Russian Orthodox hierarch will never reconcile with such a criminal endeavor.

But the sad thing is that the reaction to the red [soviet] autocephaly is far from what it should have been. It would seem that the parishes and Orthodox Russian people in their masses should move away from this contagion. But we do not see this yet. Only an insignificant part has moved away. This is an indication of how difficult it is now becoming to defend Orthodoxy and how difficult the path is becoming for the Church Abroad, which has set as its sacred task the preservation of all the Holy Father's traditions and the good Orthodox traditions of our Russian Orthodox Church.



Saint Philaret of New York

Of course, you and I know well that where truth is, there is God, and if we strive to remain faithful to the truth, the Lord will not forget us or forsake us. However, I would like to repeat what has been said many times before, but it needs to be repeated because, first of all, it is forgotten, and secondly, because many have not heard it before and ask questions: "How can the Orthodox Church anathematize those who have gone astray, who have strayed from Orthodoxy and the Church? Isn't that too severe and cruel?"

Let it be known to everyone that the Church never anathematizes anyone. The word "anathema" is a dreadful word. In the Gospel, we know of only one indication of when this dreadful word will be pronounced, and only One can utter it—when at the Dreadful Judgment, the terrible Judge will say to those who were unfaithful to Him, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Only He alone can say this; we never anathematize anyone. The anathema pronounced by the Church is not a curse or a call for God's wrath and punishment on someone. It is simply a severing from the Church, a separation from those who have already ceased to be part of it. Only those who remain faithful to the Church and belong to it are truly members of the Church.

Yesterday, we cited the words of the Savior: "He who does not hear the Church is like a heathen and a tax collector," i.e., he ceases to be a Christian. The Church proclaims anathema only upon those who have, in fact, cut themselves off from communion with the Church, who have ceased to listen to its maternal voice. And this is not only for the knowledge of others so that they know about it, but also for the benefit of those who are being anathematized. The Church hopes that this solemn warning will have an effect on them—they will tremble when they hear of the judgment the Church has declared upon them for their errors and they will repent.

In the past, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians about how false teachers appeared among them, trying to mislead them by preaching something other than what he had preached. Addressing the Galatians about this, the Apostle Paul said, "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed." So the Apostle said, and afterward repeated, "Let him be accursed." That is why the Church proclaims anathema. But remember that the proclamation of anathema is accompanied, in the Triumph of Orthodoxy, by heartfelt prayers to the Lord that He Himself will enlighten those who have gone astray. The Church is compelled to say that they are anathema, that is, apostates, and have cut themselves off from communion with the Church. However, the Church grieves for them and prays for them, that the Lord may help them to come to their senses and return to the fold of the mother Church. Amen.

References

[1]. "Православие в современном мире: Смысл анафемы," Русская Православная Церковь Заграницей, Синод Агафангела, accessed July 23rd, 2023,
<https://sinod.ruschurchabroad.org/documents%20m%20Filaret%20znachenie%20anafemy.htm>

[2]. Saint Philaret is referring to the Metropolia (OCA) who have their origins as a schism from the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia and gained their "autocephaly" from the Soviet Moscow Patriarchate in 1970.